



Just Do It

Summary and Goal

Why do you do what you do—to gain the adoration of God or of others? Jesus taught His disciples to be careful to not “practice their righteousness” for the praise of man but instead for the glory of God as they gave, prayed, forgave and fasted.

Main Passages

Matthew 6:1-18

Session Outline

1. Giving that Glorifies God (Matt. 6:1-4)
2. Praying that Pleases God (Matt. 6:5-15)
3. Fasting that Focuses on God (Matt. 6:16-18)

Theological Theme

Truly righteous deeds proceed from a heart that is humble before the Lord and seeks to please Him only. Therefore, righteous giving, praying, and fasting are fruits present in those who have been counted righteous for Christ’s sake.

Christ Connection

The glorious gospel of Jesus Christ powerfully saves people from death, sin, and separation from God. It also powerfully transforms people from self-centered, sin-seeking rebels into God-centered, good-loving worshipers.

Missional Application

Humble, sincere acts of devotion are compelling testimony to a lost world.

Historical Context of Matthew

Purpose

Matthew probably wrote his Gospel in order to preserve written eyewitness testimony about the ministry of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel emphasizes certain theological truths. First, Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited King of God's people. Second, Jesus is the new Abraham, the founder of a new spiritual Israel consisting of all people who choose to follow him. This new Israel will consist of both Jews and Gentiles. Third, Jesus is the new Moses, the deliverer and instructor of God's people. Fourth, Jesus is the Immanuel, the virgin-born Son of God who fulfills the promises of the OT.

Author

The author did not identify himself in the text. However, the title that ascribes this Gospel to Matthew appears in the earliest manuscripts and is possibly original. Titles became necessary to distinguish one Gospel from another when the four Gospels began to circulate as a single collection. Many early church fathers (Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaeus, and Origen) acknowledged Matthew as the author. Papias also contended that Matthew first wrote in Hebrew, implying that this Gospel was later translated into Greek.

Setting

Determining the date of composition of Matthew's Gospel depends largely on the relationship of the Gospels to one another. Most scholars believe that Matthew utilized Mark's Gospel in writing his own gospel. If this is correct, Matthew's Gospel must postdate Mark's. However, the date of Mark's Gospel is also shrouded in mystery. Irenaeus (ca AD 180) seems to claim that Mark wrote his Gospel after Peter's death in the mid-60s. However, Clement of Alexandria, who wrote only twenty years after Irenaeus, claimed that Mark wrote his Gospel while Peter was still alive. Given the ambiguity of the historical evidence, a decision must be based on other factors.

Special Features

This Gospel was written from a strong Jewish perspective to show that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

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Session Plan

Just Do It

Introduction

- ❓ How do our actions show what we truly believe?
- ❓ What are some examples of ways people might contradict their words with their actions? What are some ways you have been guilty of this?

Followers of Christ must be careful to practice true righteousness by being obedient to God for His sake alone. Many people do good deeds without giving glory to Christ. But, the mature, faithful Christian has left that way of doing good works behind. The growing Christian repents of hypocritical righteous deeds and seeks only God's face, not the praise of men.

1. Giving that Glorifies God (Matt. 6:1-4)

Christians are givers because they have been and continue to be the most blessed of receivers. Christians have an advanced degree in the school of generosity. They have received a pardon for sin, adoption as sons, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and a secured and hopeful future in heaven with God. Those good gifts are a Christian's treasure. Christ is their joy, hope, and peace, and a relationship with Him will never be lost. Nothing a person can possess compares to the value of knowing Christ.

- ❓ What was Jesus' point in these verses? What was His focus in regards to giving?
- ❓ Do you regularly give to the church? How might you assess your motivation for giving? How might God be calling you to begin giving?
- ❓ Application: If you are a Christian, how have the good gifts that you have received in the gospel of Jesus Christ shaped your perspective on and habits of giving?

2. Praying that Glorifies God (Matthew 6:5-15)

Just as the grace and mercy shown to Christians in Christ Jesus are the grounds of their giving, they are also what undergird and sustain their praying. Prayer is a precious gift. It is the primary vehicle by which

followers of Christ direct themselves to God. God speaks through His Word by His Spirit, and His people respond to Him through prayer by His Spirit.

- ❓ What kind of praying did Jesus tell His listeners to avoid? What might this type of prayer look like for us?
- ❓ How does the model prayer help us understand what prayer is really all about?
- ❓ Application: Are your times of prayer about you and what you want or are they about God and His glory?

3. Fasting that Glorifies God (Matt. 6:16-18)

In Christian churches, many members give regularly and pray regularly, but fasting is practiced very little, if at all. We ought not turn fasting into a law that is forced upon the consciences of Christians. However, fasting is a good gift that is useful in the Christian's process of sanctification. When properly understood, Christians will be attracted to it because they will see it as a means to grow in godliness and worship of the one true and living God. In this passage, Jesus recaptured these useful disciplines that had been corrupted, abused, misused. They were originally intended for the good of man to draw near to God, but they were being used for self-promotion.

- ❓ How familiar are you with fasting? Is this something you seek to make a practice of or not? How does Jesus' teaching on this subject challenge you?
- ❓ What are some ways we might fast wrongly today? What is the reward that Jesus promised in His teaching?
- ❓ Application: What sorts of rewards and blessings do you most seek from God? What needs to change based on today's study?

Conclusion

- ❓ Do you find yourself more worried about impressing those around you with your religious devotion than you are about pleasing God? What needs to change that you might be focused on God?
- ❓ How does a focus on God over other people lead us to better relationships with others in the church?
- ❓ How might living in a way that is focused on pleasing God and not other people give you opportunities to have gospel conversations with others?



Expanded Session Content

Just Do It

Introduction

Many of us have had the experience of discovering a childhood pet goldfish dead. It's doubtful that any of us were trained veterinarians as children, but we knew immediately that something was wrong. We had enough sense to know that our fish had died. It was floating upside down. It wasn't swimming anymore. That's the difference between dead fish and live fish. Dead fish move only in response to outside forces. Live fish, however, move and swim on their own.

In our passage today, Jesus commanded His listeners to obey His words, giving them instructions on giving, prayer, and fasting. Not only was Jesus strengthening the faith of those who loved Him and trusted Him, He was also outing those who did not love Him and trust Him. True spiritual life is always accompanied by obedience. Those who are spiritually dead don't care about God's Word; they are carried along by the world and sinful desires. Charles Spurgeon put it like this:

"Living fish may go with the stream at times, but dead fish must always do so. There are plenty of such in all waters: dead souls, so far as the truest life is concerned, and these are always drifting, drifting, drifting as the current takes them. Their first inquiry is — what is customary? God's law is of small account to them, but the unwritten rules of society have a power over them which they never think of resisting."¹

- ❓ How do our actions show what we truly believe?
- ❓ What are some examples of ways people might contradict their words with their actions? What are some ways you have been guilty of this?

Session Summary




Followers of Christ must be careful to practice true righteousness by being obedient to God for His sake alone. Many people do good deeds without giving glory to Christ. But, the mature, faithful Christian has left that way of doing good works behind. The growing Christian repents of hypocritical righteous deeds and seeks only God's face, not the praise of men.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount we see a recurring formula:

1. DON'T do good works unto God in public
 - a. so you will be seen by man
 - i. man's recognition is your reward
2. DO good works unto God in secret
 - a. so God will see you
 - i. and He will reward you

1. Giving that Glorifies God (Matt. 6:1-4)

Giving tithes and offerings was an integral part of the religious life of ancient Israel. Today, we are familiar with the weekly passing of the offering plate, which can give us somewhat of an idea of the practice of giving in Israel. Both represent regular opportunities to give and both are public in nature and can be manipulated by the giver in order to garner the applause of men.

-  What was Jesus' point in these verses? What was His focus in regards to giving?
-  Do you regularly give to the church? How might you assess your motivation for giving? How might God be calling you to begin giving?
-  Application: If you are a Christian, how have the good gifts that you have received in the gospel of Jesus Christ shaped your perspective on and habits of giving?



There are numerous passages in the New Testament that make it clear that the faithful Christian life is characterized by generous, joyful giving. The question of whether or not a follower of Christ should give isn't even on the table. Jesus didn't bother with it. Instead, He jumped straight to how we ought to give.

Christians are givers because they have been and continue to be the most blessed of receivers. Christians have an advanced degree in the school of generosity. They have received a pardon for sin, adoption as sons, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and a secured and hopeful future in heaven with God. Those good gifts are a Christian's treasure. Christ is their joy, hope, and peace, and a relationship with Him will never be lost. Nothing a person can possess compares to the value of knowing Christ.

2. Praying that Glorifies God (Matthew 6:5-15)

Just as the grace and mercy shown to Christians in Christ Jesus are the grounds of their giving, they are also what undergird and sustain their praying. Prayer is a precious gift. It is the primary vehicle by which followers of Christ direct themselves to God. God speaks through His Word by His Spirit, and His people respond to Him through prayer by His Spirit. John Piper wrote, “Prayer is the way you walk by the Spirit. Prayer is the way you walk by faith. In other words, it’s the breath of the Christian life all day long. Just breathe in, breathe out. It’s the way you live.”²

One thing to note is that all three of the disciplines that Jesus mentioned in this section are designed to be “unto God.” That is, they are to be directed toward God. But, of the three, prayer is most Godward in that it is the very act of communicating directly with Him. Thus, Jesus gave more time for explanation of prayer. Jesus’ main point was that prayer is about God, not us.

-  What kind of praying did Jesus tell His listeners to avoid? What might this type of prayer look like for us?
-  How does the model prayer help us understand what prayer is really all about?

The common thread we see in all three of the disciplines that Jesus mentioned is the desire “to be seen by people.” Jesus condemned praying that is repurposed to bring glory and applause to the one praying. He condemned this because it is a perversion of the true purpose of prayer. We are meant to love God above all and seek His glory above all. However, this kind of praying turns that truth on its head. When we pray to be seen by others, then we are loving ourselves above all and seeking our own glory above all.

People love themselves more than God and seek their own glory instead of God’s glory all the time, but there is something especially appalling about someone doing so by manipulating a gift from God as precious as prayer. The person who is truly born again won’t stomach praying for his or her own profit for long. The Spirit of God won’t let them.

The Model Prayer, or the Lord’s Prayer, is a template by which we can pray in our own words. We should be careful of two pitfalls. One is to assign some sort of magical power to repeating this prayer word for word, as though we can manipulate God by chanting it. The second mistake is to disregard it all together. It is an important prayer, but we have to have the right perspective on it. Jesus gave us this prayer as a guide or model that serves to shape our priorities and posture in prayer.

Jesus first instructed His followers to address God as Father. Christians look to God as children, recognizing His tenderness, nearness, and authority. The first two petitions set the tone for this prayer and, if we will allow it, our whole lives. Jesus taught to pray for God's name to be honored as holy and for His will to be done. These petitions are directly against praying for our own glory. Can you see the dissonance between praying these petitions while praying to be seen by men to get glory? Again, the Christian person can't continue in that disharmony for long.


Only after those petitions did Jesus teach His people to ask for their needs. But these are simple: daily bread and forgiveness of sin. Our praying (both our words and our intentions) should prioritize God's glory and should be marked with a posture of humility.


 Application: Are your times of prayer about you and what you want or are they about God and His glory?

3. Fasting that Glorifies God (Matt. 6:16-18)

Our giving, praying, and fasting ought to be unto God both in our exterior actions and the motivation of our hearts. All three of these disciplines are good gifts that the Lord has given Christians as a means by which they can relate to Him and grow in faith and grace. But, as Jesus pointed out, they can also be twisted to extract praise and glory from other people.

Fasting is the most uncommon discipline of the three in our time. In Christian churches, many members give regularly and pray regularly, but fasting is practiced very little, if at all. We ought not turn fasting into a law that is forced upon the consciences of Christians. However, fasting is a good gift that is useful in the Christian's process of sanctification. When properly understood, Christians will be attracted to it because they will see it as a means to grow in godliness and worship of the one true and living God. In this passage, Jesus recaptured these useful disciplines that had been corrupted, abused, misused. They were originally intended for the good of man to draw near to God, but they were being used for self-promotion.

 How familiar are you with fasting? Is this something you seek to make a practice of or not? How does Jesus' teaching on this subject challenge you?

 What are some ways we might fast wrongly today? What is the reward that Jesus promised in His teaching?

Fasting Outside of Food

The temporary deprivation of the body for the purpose of prayer and vigilance can have a profound spiritual impact, both on the person fasting and on the objects of their prayer. Further, consider the possibility that dietary fasting is only one example of a broader category of Christian discipline. For example, many families have benefited by rising to the challenge of a “TV fast.” First Corinthians 7:5 seems to support the idea of a brief sexual fast. Even the discipline of solitude might fall in this category, as a “fast” from normal human interaction.

A self-promoting approach to the disciplines has no place among born again followers of Christ. Christians can rightly practice the disciplines by clinging to Christ, in secret, unto God, and seeking no other reward but God’s good gifts.

When a follower of Jesus Christ practices these disciplines with a humble heart and with God’s glory in mind, then there is great joy, peace, and communion to be found, but only for those whose hearts are clean, humble, and redeemed.

The reward Jesus spoke of wasn’t worldly riches, fame, or health. Christians may experience those things, but they understand their greatest treasure isn’t anything that this world offers. No, the reward of the Father is joy in suffering, peace in persecution, and His own faithful love. The reward of the Father is a heart and mind that are being conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.



Application: What sorts of rewards and blessings do you most seek from God? What needs to change based on today’s study?

Conclusion

Jesus began His Sermon on the Mount by giving assurance to His true followers that they were currently blessed because of a sure and future hope. He then emphasized just how high of a standard a person is expected to meet in order to live a life pleasing to God. Christians respond to this impossibly high standard with repentance of their sin, a deeper conviction of their need for Christ, and gratefulness to Christ for His perfect obedience that is credited to them.

In our passage today, Jesus emphasized the orientation of the soul of a redeemed person. A person who has experienced the power of the gospel and continues to cling to Jesus will be first and foremost focused on God. Thus, their giving, praying, fasting, and any other discipline will be Godward. And when the Lord graciously brings to their attention that they are in opposition to His will, their response won’t be stiff-necked rebellion, but humble repentance.

As we lean into these practices in the manner that Jesus has called us to, we find these not as means to gain right standing before God but means by which we enjoy fellowship with God and are able to reflect deeply on the work of the gospel on our behalf.

- ❓ Do you find yourself more worried about impressing those around you with your religious devotion than you are about pleasing God? What needs to change that you might be focused on God?
- ❓ How does a focus on God over other people lead us to better relationships with others in the church?
- ❓ How might living in a way that is focused on pleasing God and not other people give you opportunities to have gospel conversations with others?

Prayer of Response

Close in prayer asking God to lead you to practice giving, prayer, and fasting not for the approval of men but for the glory of God. Thank God that He has given these practices as a means of communing with Him in daily life.

Additional Resources

- *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald Whitney
- *A Praying Life* by Paul Miller
- *Habits of Grace* by David Mathis

For Next Week

Session Title

- Where is Your Treasure?

Main Passages

- Matthew 6:19-24

Session Outline

1. The Treasure (Matt. 6:19-21)
2. The Eye (Matt. 6:22-23)
3. The Servant (Matt. 6:24)

Memorize

⁹ *“Therefore, you should pray like this:*

*Our Father in heaven,
your name be honored as holy.*

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come.*

*Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.*

¹¹ *Give us today our daily bread.*

¹² *And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

¹³ *And do not bring us into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.*

- Matthew 6:9-13

Daily Readings

- Monday - Exodus 20:3-6
- Tuesday - Colossians 3:5
- Wednesday - Galatians 4:8
- Thursday - 1 Corinthians 10:7
- Friday - 1 Corinthians 6:9
- Saturday - Matthew 13:44

Extended Commentary

Matthew 6:1-18

6:1 Jesus did not prohibit public acts of righteousness, but he warned that the motivation for such acts is more important than the bare fact of performing them. All such deeds must be done for God's glory, not human reputation. Those who seek human acclaim when performing good works will receive no heavenly reward. In Mt 6:2-18, Jesus supplies general principles for performing righteous acts.

6:2-4 The words whenever you give assume that disciples will regularly assist needy people. The prohibition don't sound a trumpet stems from the fact that the offering chests in the temple (shofar chests or trumpet chests) were trumpet-shaped with a wide opening where coins were deposited and a winding, ever-narrower funnel that, at its narrowest point, exits into the chest. This arrangement prevented thieves from sticking their hands into the chest (Sheqal. 2:1; 6:1,5). Thus, "sounding the trumpet" is likely a reference to tossing coins noisily into the trumpet-shaped coffer and thereby calling attention to one's generosity. Jesus described such conduct as hypocritical. The word hypocrites (Gk hupocrite-s) originally referred to actors who performed in Greek or Roman theaters. The hypocrites to whom Jesus referred are spiritual actors who pretend to have piety in order to win human approval. The instructions about the left hand and the right hand prohibit a person from celebrating personal acts of righteousness. Give liberally, but never dwell on the fact that you do so.

6:5 Standing in the synagogues (gathering places for Jewish worship) or on the street corners when praying ensured that many people saw the hypocrites praying, but Jesus taught that God has no regard for such actions.

6:6 A private room (Gk tameion) was a room that did not have doors or windows to the building's exterior. Closing the door granted total privacy. Since the true disciple prays for a heavenly rather than a human audience, privacy is ideal for genuine prayer. Jesus described the Father as the one who is in secret. God is ever-present. The disciple can encounter him in the most obscure locations. Jesus's words do not prohibit public prayers—which are encouraged in the church (see 1Co 14:26).

6:7 The babbling of Gentiles may refer to the meaningless gibberish that appears in Greek magical papyri. Like the familiar "abracadabra," these formulas were nonsensical combinations of sounds that were believed to have special power. Ancient texts show that Jews sometimes embraced these practices.

6:8 Genuine and effective prayers don't need to be long prayers.

6:9 By commanding his disciples to pray like this rather than simply “pray this,” Jesus demonstrated that this prayer was offered as a model rather than a mantra to be recited. The first person plural pronoun *Our* implies that Jesus intended this prayer to be a model for corporate prayer, i.e., a prayer for when disciples gather as a group. This confirms that Mt 6:5 was not intended to prohibit disciples from praying together publicly in the synagogue or other gatherings but instead prohibited prayers that were motivated by religious showmanship. *Your name be honored as holy* suggests that Jesus expected his disciples to live righteous lives that honor rather than profane God's name (5:16; Lv 22:31-32). This is an important precondition for successful prayer.

6:10 In light of parallels with contemporary Jewish prayers and Jesus's teaching that the kingdom of God is a present reality but also awaits a fuller future consummation, the petition *your kingdom come* has a present and a future focus. The petition asks that disciples submit more fully to God's will as subjects of his reign through Jesus. We should daily pray for the future consummation of God's rule in which he will reign fully and completely over the world.

6:11 Daily bread was the amount of bread necessary to survive for a day. The request is reminiscent of Pr 30:8-9. Jesus wanted his disciples to live in a state of constant dependence on God and his provision.

6:12 The Greek grammar indicates that the disciple prays for forgiveness from God only after having first expressed forgiveness to others.

6:13 Do not bring us into temptation. As James makes clear, God does not tempt anyone (Jms 1:13). Moreover, God certainly permits his people to undergo temptation. The idea is “do not let us fall to temptation” or “do not abandon us to temptation.” According to Paul, though believers experience temptation, they do not have to yield to it. For God provides “a way out” (1Co 10:13).

6:14-15 God forgives those who are truly repentant. True repentance results in a willingness to forgive others.

6:16-18 *They make their faces unattractive* refers to the Jewish practice of smearing ashes on the face and wearing grim expressions during times of fasting. Although these acts originally expressed true repentance, hypocrites adopted them as a mask of false piety.³

References

1. Spurgeon, Charles H. *Flowers from a Puritan's Garden, Distilled and Dispensed*. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1976.
2. Hansen, Collin. *The New City Catechism Devotional: Gods Truth for Our Hearts and Minds*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.
3. *CSB Study Bible: Christian Standard Bible*. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017.

Author Bio

Charles Spurgeon (Flowers from a Puritan's Garden)

A prolific author and pastor, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) remains a respected and influential source of inspiration and study. His classic collection of devotions for morning and evening remain a beloved treasure of wisdom and teaching for Christians.

Collin Hansen (The New City Catechism Devotional)

Collin Hansen (MDiv, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) serves as the editorial director for the Gospel Coalition. He previously worked as an associate editor for Christianity Today magazine and coedits the Cultural Renewal series with Tim Keller. He and his wife belong to Redeemer Community Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and he serves on the advisory board of Beeson Divinity School. You can follow him on Twitter at @collinhansen.

Donald Whitney (Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life)

DON WHITNEY has been Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate Dean at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, since 2005. Before that, he held a similar position (the first such position in the six Southern Baptist seminaries) at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, MO, for 10 years. He is the founder and president of The Center for Biblical Spirituality. Don is a frequent speaker in churches, retreats, and conferences in the U.S. and abroad.

Paul Miller (A Praying Life)

Paul E. Miller is executive director of seeJesus, the global discipling mission he founded in 1999 to help Christians and non-Christians alike “see Jesus.” Today, seeJesus works in over 30 countries and has books and interactive Bible study materials translated into at least a dozen languages.

David Mathis (Habits of Grace)

David is executive editor of desiringGod.org, pastor at Cities Church, and adjunct professor for Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author, editor, or contributor for more than ten books, and his regular articles are available online at desiringGod.org/mathis. He is married to Megan and father of three children.